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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000225

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SUBJECT: MOROCCO: ISLAMIST PJD GEARING UP FOR PRIME TIME

REF: A. 06 RABAT 1883
[1](#)B. 06 RABAT 1621
[1](#)C. 06 RABAT 1276
[1](#)D. 06 RABAT 1272
[1](#)E. 06 RABAT 0633
[1](#)F. 06 RABAT 0048

Classified by DCM Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) may emerge from elections later this year as Morocco's single largest party in the directly-elected lower house of parliament. In recent conversations, key party leaders indicated confidence that the PJD could double (or more than double) its current share of lower house seats to 25-30 percent, though the system is structured to prevent any party from gaining an outright majority. The PJD is prepared to either join in the formation of a new government or to sit it out as an even stronger opposition party. They are resolutely opposed to U.S. policy in the Middle East and Iraq, but are prepared to maintain an open dialogue with the U.S. Mission in Morocco. Our PJD interlocutors stressed their loyalty to the monarchy, detailed pragmatic policy ideas, and sought to distance themselves from extremism. The party's critics continue to insist that its moderate facade conceals a hard-core Islamist interior. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The PJD is judged by independent observers to be more effective and campaign-oriented than the sclerotic traditional parties. A recent assessment published by Democracy Reporting International, a German NGO characterized the PJD as the only major Moroccan party "having coherent objectives" and "(also) based on a higher degree of internal democracy than the other big parties." A poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, which showed the PJD as the choice of 47 percent of likely voters in a hypothetical vote question (well ahead of any other party) is still regularly cited both by party supporters and particularly by party opponents, almost eight months since it was leaked to the Moroccan press.

Opposition to U.S. Policy a Given

[1](#)3. (C) Lahsen Daoudi, one of three deputy speakers and a prominent leader of the PJD's parliamentary bloc (currently 42 of 325 seats in the Chamber of Deputies), and Abdel-Ilah Ben Kirane, a PJD MP and party point man on foreign affairs issues (also editor-in-chief of Al-Tajdeed, the Arabic daily which serves as a PJD mouthpiece), each received polcouns and poloff in late January visits. While offering a cordial welcome, the PJD leaders opened discussions with blistering criticism of U.S. intervention in Iraq - "We warned you not to do this," and blasted perceived imbalance and unfairness in U.S. handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. U.S. policies in the region "have sent a very, very negative

message to the Muslims of the world," Daoudi asserted.

PJD Bullish on Prospects...

14. (C) We found the PJD leaders confident of a strong showing in the coming elections for the lower house, expected by most observers to occur either at the beginning or the end (but not in the middle) of summer 2007. Daoudi's prediction generally tracked with Ben Kirane's, allowing that the party could double its current presence in the Chamber of Deputies to 80 seats, roughly one quarter of the Chamber's 325 seats. Both expressed concern about the influence of money in manipulating voters and expressed general (but not particularly pronounced) concern that the GOM might tamper with the electoral process to curb the PJD's showing.

15. (C) Interestingly, neither PJD interlocutor expressed objections to recent statements of senior GOM leaders, such as that of Prime Minister Jettou during a mid-January visit to France, affirming that there would be no landslides in the coming parliamentary elections and Morocco's political landscape will retain its basic shape. Some observers read into Jettou's statement, and similar recent remarks by the Interior Minister, a GOM signal that it will not allow a PJD landslide.

16. (C) In remarks to the press, PJD President Saadeddine al-Othmani himself harshly criticized (the ostensibly neutral) Jettou for prejudging the outcome of the polls, while Ben Kirane told us the Prime Minister's statement was merely reflecting reality: Morocco's political system is designed to prevent any single party from dominating the

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government. A broad range of non-PJD contacts share the view that the PJD will emerge from the coming elections as the strongest single party but also concur that the PJD will not get an outright majority. Moreover, the PJD is hardly present at all in Parliament's indirectly-elected upper house.

...But More Tentative About Governing

17. (C) PJD interlocutors are slightly coy about the party's readiness to make common cause with other groupings to form a governing coalition. "It is much more comfortable to be in the opposition. When we are in the opposition, the people in my neighborhood view me as a hero. If we join the government, the people will view me with suspicion," reflected Daoudi. "However, the people are not voting for us just to criticize, they want us to make a difference in their lives," he added.

18. (C) Ben Kirane also implied, but stopped short of confirming, that the PJD would be prepared to join the government, even if the King, rather than the senior coalition partner, chose the Prime Minister. Reflecting another view within the PJD, MP Mustafa Ramid, an oft-quoted Casablančan known for his anti-American views, has publicly expressed reluctance to join the government, opining that "in the current system we would not be able to make a difference." Indeed, some observers believe the GOM would welcome a PJD presence, albeit for cynical reasons. An MP from the mostly Berber Mouvement Populaire, recently told poloff he believed the GOM will draw the PJD into government, allocate to them a few (marginal) ministerial portfolios, and let their popularity sink as their inability to "deliver the goods" to their voters becomes apparent. Another observer from the same party asserted that the PJD has not distinguished itself in the positions it now holds at the local level.

Policy Priorities

¶9. (C) Our PJD interlocutors stressed that addressing bread and butter issues was their central priority for the country. Unemployment, inadequate housing, and corruption are the key concerns of Moroccan voters Ben Kirane asserted. Parliamentary leader Daoudi, himself an economist, bemoaned the "waste of human capital," in today's Morocco. He briefly touted his work on an "Islamic microcredit" scheme as one approach a government including the PJD might follow to combat poverty.

¶10. (C) Interestingly, Daoudi put the Western Sahara problem in the context of the effort to overcome the structural weaknesses of Morocco's economy, maintaining (as does the U.S.) that resolving the Sahara question would eliminate the main obstacle to regional integration and allow Morocco, Algeria, and other states in the region to collaborate on development and employment generation. Daoudi noted that the PJD had already elaborated, after consultation with its "numerous members in the Sahara," a detailed autonomy plan that proposed structures for local government, formulas for the distribution of natural resources, and even a territorial energy policy. (Comment: The contrast with the opaque CORCAS process is striking. End comment.)

Loyalty to the Throne

¶11. (C) Our PJD interlocutors stressed their loyalty to the Moroccan monarchy. Abdel-Ilah Ben Kirane, recalling his imprisonment as a young man for his affiliation with the "Islamist Youth" organization by Hassan II's government, nonetheless told us he thought the late monarch "an autocrat, but a great statesman." (Note: Since his early release from prison, in contrast with the long sentences served by his Islamist Youth colleagues, Ben Kirane has waxed positive on the throne. End note.)

¶12. (C) Ben Kirane drew a distinction between the State and the Government, saying the PJD would remain loyal and supportive of the former, even as it felt free to criticize and pressure the latter. Likewise, Daoudi, whose parliamentary office was decorated with several portraits of King Mohammed VI, including one of the King as a young prince with his father, stressed the PJD had no intention of challenging the legitimacy of the monarchy, though both allowed they would like to see enhanced powers for the

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parliament.

How Hard is Their Line?

¶13. (C) Whether the PJD should be viewed as a moderate, modernizing party "with Islamic references" or as a party with a hard-line Islamist agenda, concealed by a moderate facade, is one of the principle subjects of debate among observers of the Moroccan political scene. The two key members of the party leadership with whom we recently met were each at pains to portray the PJD as a party focused on improving the economy, reforming government, and combating corruption, rather than a party obsessed with regulating public morality and imposing piety on Morocco's diverse and multi-layered society. PJD leaders stress their ties with counterpart Islamist parties elsewhere in the world. (Note: A Turkish diplomat recently confirmed to us that the PJD has close and amicable ties to their Turkish namesake, the ruling AKP. End note.)

¶14. (C) Yet critics of the party believe that the PJD's moderate face, embodied by party president Saadeddine Al-Othmani, cloaks a hard-line inner core. Feminist MP Milouda Hazeb recently asserted to poloff that the PJD, given the opportunity, would pursue a conservative social agenda, including shutting down the production and sale of alcohol, imposing conservative dress codes for women, and targeting secularism for eradication. "They would set back the clock by decades," she stated.

¶15. (C) Indeed, the Arabic daily Al-Tajdid, which serves as a medium for the PJD, and is edited by our "moderate" interlocutor Ben Kirane, is indicative of a conservative Islamist trend of thinking in Morocco. The paper's above-the-fold headline is often concerned with issues such as "the scandal" of an Egyptian actresses' brief nudity in a recent film or of the national airline's "incredible" directive that pilots should not fast while on duty. The paper also regularly highlights provocative photos depicting "degradation" of Guantanamo prisoners or misrepresenting statements by U.S. officials, with headlines such as "Rumsfeld admits the total failure of his Iraq plan."

¶16. (C) Though generally subtle about its deployment, the PJD is prepared, at times, to play "the Islam card" openly against political rivals and even the government itself. At a party meeting in the late fall of 2006, a party member declared, in front of Othmani and other leaders, that the drought that gripped the country over the fall was due to the fact that senior GOM officials were not saying their prayers. This charge was neither repeated nor disavowed by the party leadership.

¶17. (C) The activities and comments of prominent PJD MP Mustafa Ramid also tend to support the arguments of those who describe the party as hard-line. Always outspoken and given to sharp rhetoric, Ramid openly criticized Party leader Othmani for visiting the U.S. (on a USG funded IV program) in the summer of 2006. Ramid is a regular attendee at protests against U.S. policy in Iraq and/or Palestine and was photographed last summer sporting a "Washington D.C." t-shirt with a red circle and slash over the capitol dome. Responding to poloff's question, Daoudi maintained that Ramid did not represent a different faction of the party, but allowed that "he attracts citizens and supporters who would not otherwise vote for us."

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